

Experiences of women migrant workers and their reintegration status in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of women migrant workers and their reintegration status in Nepal, with a specific focus on also includes the improving of new reintegration policies for returnee women. It employs a qualitative approach; information collected from two municipalities: Dakshinkali and Tarkeshwar of Kathmandu district. Through the Focus Group Discussion and In-Depth Interviews were conducted among 48 and 40 returnee women, the study captured their lived realities. A majority of participants belonged to Janajati/Indigenous nationalities (62.5% in FGDs; 70% in IDIs) and practiced Hinduism. Nearly two-fifths (35%) of FGD respondents and one-fifth (17%) of IDI respondents took the route through India to reach third countries, highlighting a high risk of trafficking. Over two-fifths of them were below 24 years of age. Documentation status revealed that 31 percent of FGD respondents and 37.5 percent of IDI respondents were un-documented. While most returnees demonstrated a clear understanding of the concept's "return" and "reintegration," they reported inadequate support upon return especially during the lockdown period underscoring an urgent need for immediate reintegration planning to aid vulnerable returnees and facilitate family reunification. Participants emphasized the importance of social, economic, and psychosocial reintegration support.

Keywords: migrant worker, reintegration, returnee, women

Introduction

The number of international migrants, including refugees, in the world is 281 million in 2020 (UNDESA, 2021). Of them, the share of Asia is 85.6 million. Worldwide, almost half (48.1%) of them are females.¹ Migration in Nepal is characterized mainly by internal migration, long term and seasonal migration, diaspora, student migration, refugees, travel for family reunion and visits, etc. International migration for foreign employment has become a common livelihood option for millions of Nepali women and youths. The Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) issued 4,792,209 labour permits for foreign employment that includes 2, 36,688 women and 45, 55,521 men until Fiscal Year 2019/20, where the composition of skilled labour is 1.5 per cent,

¹ Migration Data Portal. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/gender-and-migration>.

semi-skilled 24 per cent and unskilled 74.5 per cent (Ministry of Finance, 2020). Despite the mobility restrictions ensued by COVID-19, a total of 368,344 people took labour permits in 2019/20.² The Government of Nepal has officially issued institutional labour permits for the foreign employment in 110 destination countries. The major countries of destination for Nepali migrant workers include Qatar (31.8%), United Arab Emirates (26.5%), Saudi Arabia (19.5%), and Kuwait (6.8%) (MoLESS, 2020).

Nepal's policy towards return migration plays a pivotal role in efficient migration management. The current pandemic is the historically consequential global health crisis and women migrants are more vulnerable and susceptible to the several risk factors. This pandemic has raised major concerns regarding the policies, plans and issues concerning labour rights and social-economic impact of migration. There is an immediate need for fostering future policies for efficient and effective repatriation and re-integration of returnee women migrants. The current situation and the findings have highlighted the need for sustainable re-integration policies and plans to help women migrant workers. The objectives of this paper are to explore the experiences of women migrant workers in out of countries and to find out the status of their reintegration after returned in Nepal.

Methodology

The paper is based on the desk review, which are substantiated by consultations with concerned stakeholders and interactions with targeted group viz. returnee migrants, aspirant migrants and internal migrants. The main data-collection tools and techniques included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs), conducted via phone, online, or face-to-face. In total, the study comprised 6 FGDs, 40 in-depth interviews, and 12 KIIs, drawing on both primary and secondary sources in line with the research objectives. Participants were randomly selected by the research team from the attendance sheet, minutes of meeting and referrals recorded during the project intervention conducted between 2019 and 2021. Research team invited participants to join the FGDs and IDIs through phone calls two days prior to the discussions/interviews. Participant who was unreachable, due to change in phone numbers or relocation, randomly replaced by the sampling frame of the project documents.

On the day of the focus group discussion and in-depth interviews, all participants were asked to give oral consent prior to participation; the secession proceeded only after consent was confirmed. The research team develops the bilingual consent form (Nepalese and English) to obtain permission for capturing video, voice and photographs. Participants were informed that these recordings could be used in full or in part for publications, news releases, online platforms, and other communications.

Results and Discussion

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The total respondents of Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) were 48 and 40 respectively. A large majority of respondents were from Janajati/Indigenous nationalities in both FGDs and IDIs (62.5% and 70%), followed by Brahmin/Chhetri (35% and 30%) and very few (2%) are Dalit. The significant proportion of respondents from FGDs and IDIs were follower of Hindu religion which were 75 percent. Of the total returnee, nearly two-fifth were unemployed (i.e. 35% respondent of FGD and 40% of IDI respondents), followed by housewife from FGDs (20.83%) and services from IDIs (45%).

² Database of Department of Foreign Employment. Accessed 16 March, 2021. This data is the total of new and re-entry categories.

The significant proportion of FGDs and IDIs respondents were married (47.92% and 77.50% respectively) while single women comprised 27 percent of FGDs. Majority of respondents from both FGDs and IDIs have completed primary education. Kuwait was the most common destination country for FGDs participants, whereas the majority of IDI respondents had worked in the UAE (32%) (Table 1).

Table 1: Background characteristics of participant of FGD and IDI

Characteristics	FGD		IDI	
	No.	%	No.	%
Caste/ethnicity				
Janajati/Indigenous nationalities	30	62.50	28	70.00
Brahmin/Chhetri	17	35.42	12	30.00
Dalit	1	2.08	0	0.00
Religion				
Hindu	36	75.00	30	75.00
Buddhist	12	25.00	10	25.00
Current Occupation of respondents				
Unemployed	17	35.42	16	40.00
Housewife	10	20.83	0	0.00
Agriculture	6	12.50	6	15.00
Service	7	14.58	18	45.00
Others	8	16.67	0	0.00
Marital status				
Married	23	47.92	31	77.50
Single Woman	13	27.08	4	10.00
Unmarried	12	25.00	5	12.50
Level of education				
Illiterate	13	27.08	0	0.00
Literate	0	0.00	5	12.50
Primary	15	31.25	22	55.00
Secondary	14	29.17	13	32.50
Higher Secondary	6	12.50	0	0.00
Country of destination				
UAE	10	20.83	13	32.50
Kuwait	16	33.33	9	22.50
Lebanon	6	12.50	4	10.00
Oman	4	8.33	3	7.50
Other	12	25.00	11	27.50
Total	48	100.00	40	100.00

Legal Status of Returnee Migrants During Travel and at Destination

The formal migration process enhances safe, secure and dignified mobility which also ensures the security of income and earnings. The channels used at the time of departure and

documentation status have great attention in terms of safe and secure migration process. The Government of Nepal (GoN) has mandatory provision of using the domestic airport for the foreign employment that means completely banned to travel from India to third countries.

Figure 1: Channels used for going foreign migration

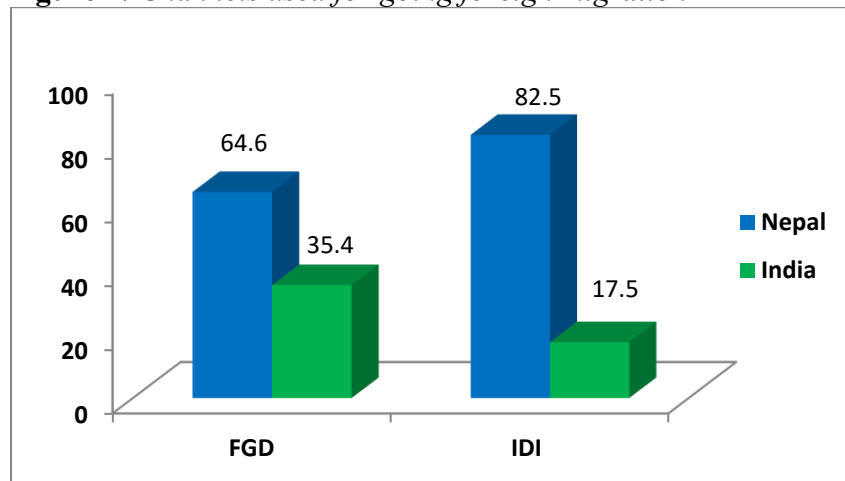
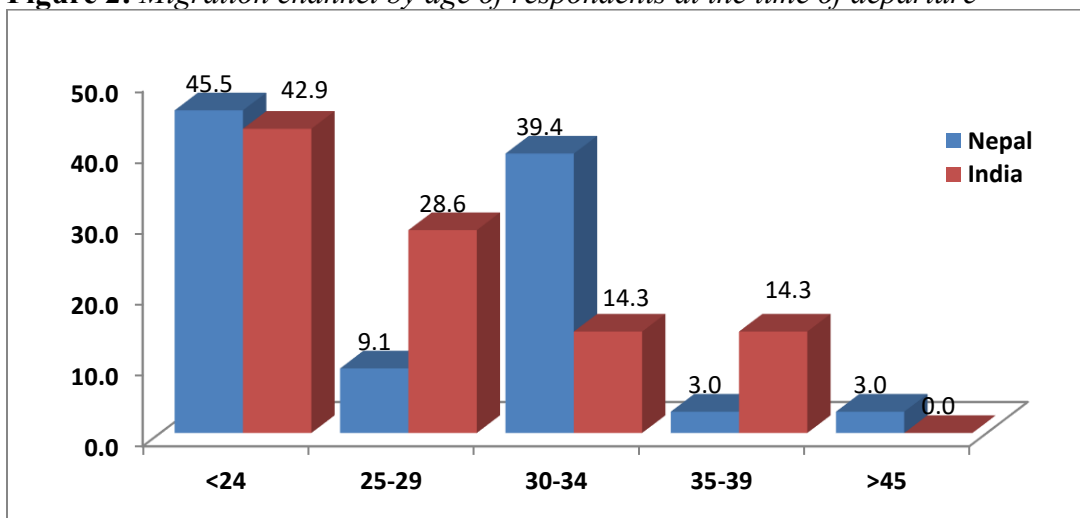


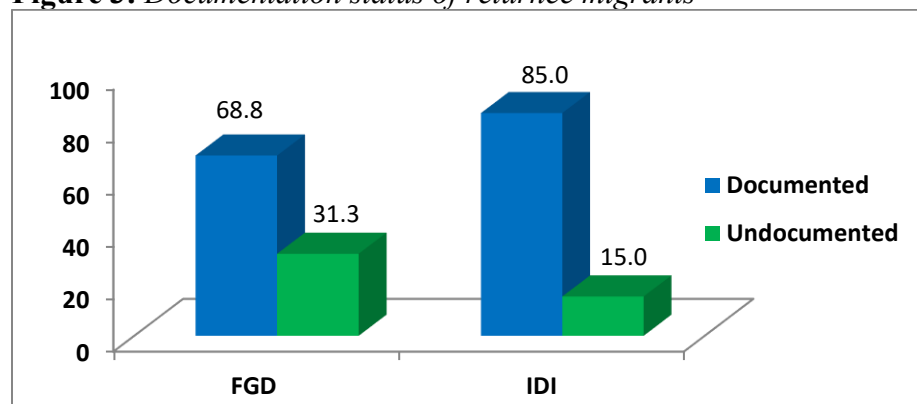
Figure 1: Illustrates that about 35 percent respondents of FGDs and 17 percent respondents of IDIs went different countries through India. It shows that there might be a high risk of becoming trafficked due to use of illegal channels. Migration channels varied by respondents' age. Among respondents under 24, about 43% traveled abroad for employment via India; this route was also used by 28.6% of those aged 25–29. However, **none** of the respondents aged 45 or older used the India route (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Migration channel by age of respondents at the time of departure



Similarly, the cases of wage theft, legal barriers and security challenges if their status is undocumented. Regarding the scenario of documentation status of respondents of both FGDs and IDIs, nearly one-third (31%) of FGDs whereas out of 40 respondents, 15 percent respondents of IDIs were undocumented (Figure 3).

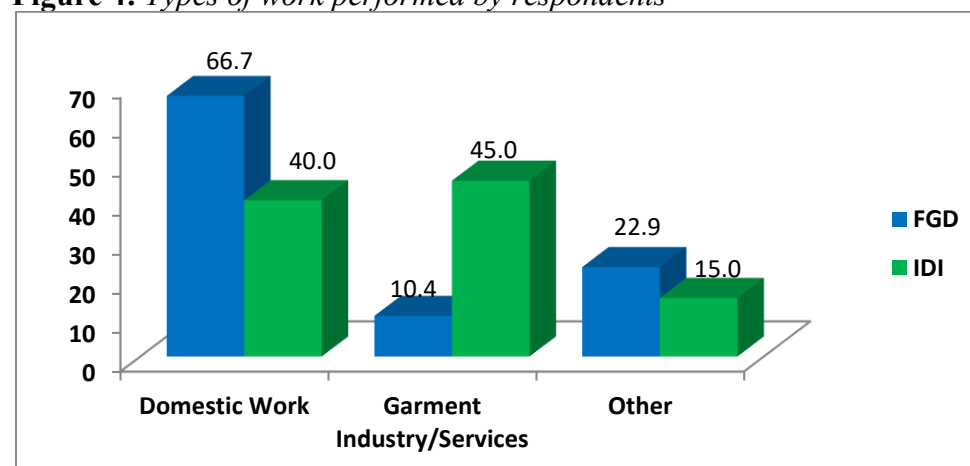
Figure 3: Documentation status of returnee migrants



Status of Work and Remittances

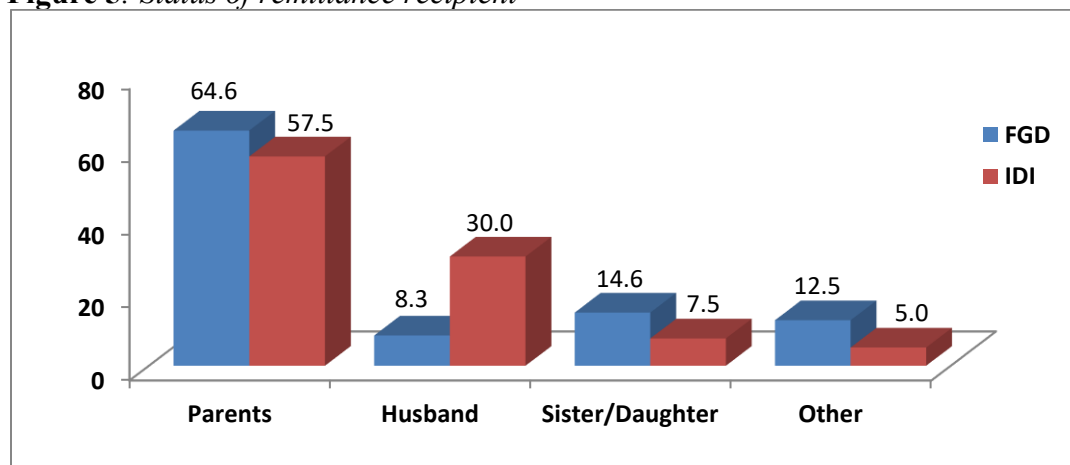
The safety, security and income of migrants are directly related to the types of work performed. In majority of cases the chances of exploitation might be higher with domestic work than that of other types of work. Majority of respondents of FGDs were engaged in domestic work (66.7%) which is contrasted with other sectors (22.9%). In the same way, two-fifths of the IDI respondents were engaged in Garment industry/service sectors (45%) which is followed by domestic work (40%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Types of work performed by respondents



Majority of respondents of both FGDs and IDIs reported that the remittances used by their parents while 65 percent respondents of FGDs and 57 percent respondents of IDIs. After parents, followed by their sister/daughter whereas respondents of IDIs used by their husband (14.6% and 30% respectively) (Figure 5).

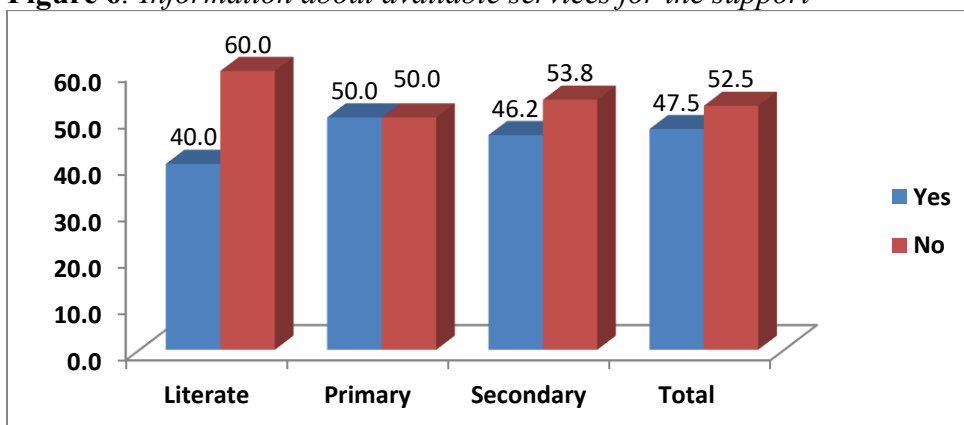
Figure 5: *Status of remittance recipient*



Status of Information for Support

Of the total respondents, about 52 per cent returnees don't have knowledge about the information of support program for returnee migrants. Nearly 46 per cent returnees with secondary education, 50 per cent with primary education and 40 per cent literate returnees have knowledge about the information regarding support program (Figure 6).

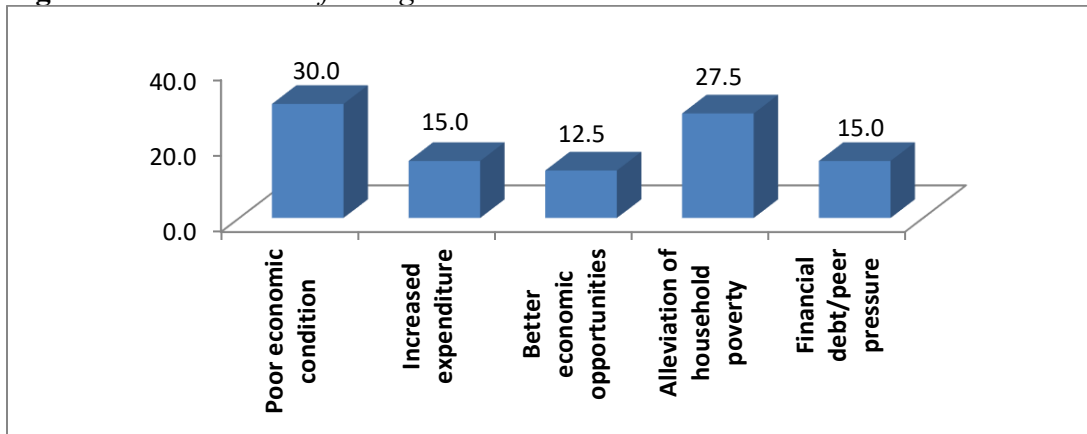
Figure 6: *Information about available services for the support*



Main Reason for Migration

In general push and pull factors are the major drivers of migration. There are multiple reasons for migration. Figure 7 reveals that the main cause of migration is poor economic condition which comprises 30 percent which is followed by alleviating household poverty (27.5%), due to increment of expenditure (15%), financial debt/peer pressure (15%) while 12 per cent migrated for grabbing better economic opportunities.

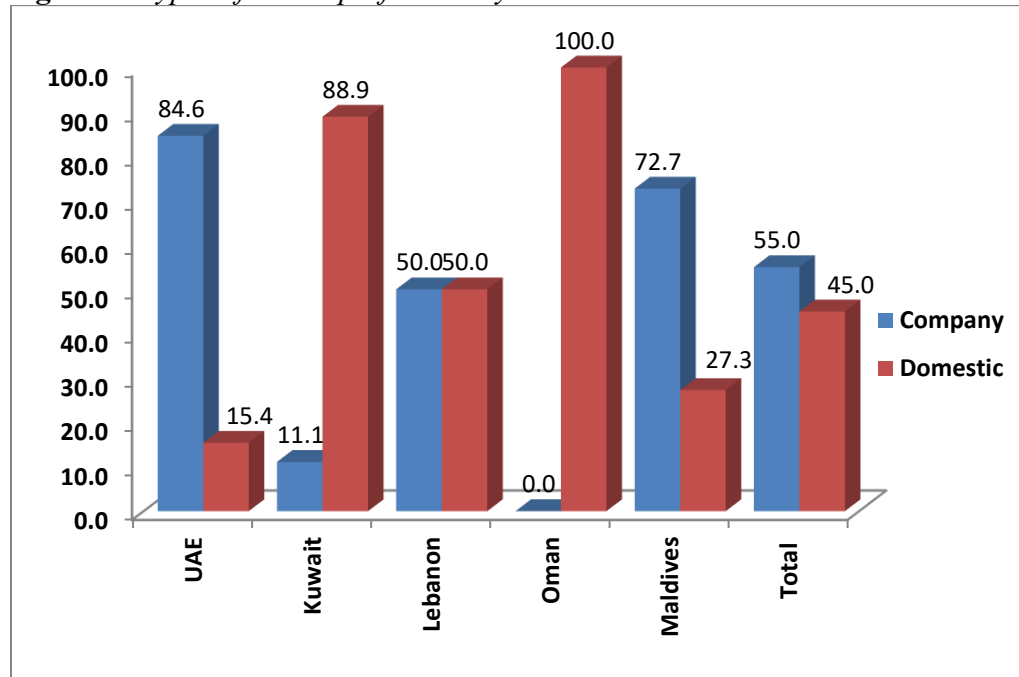
Figure 7: *Main reasons for migration*



Types of Work Performed by Returnee Migrant Workers

Most of returnee migrant workers worked in domestic and company work.. The proportion of returnee migrants from Oman who engaged in domestic work is found highest (100%) which is followed by Kuwait (88.9%), Lebanon (50%) and Maldives (27.3%). Similarly, the proportion of returnee migrants from UAE who engaged in company is found highest (84.6%) which is followed by Maldives (72.7%), Lebanon (50%) and Kuwait (11.1%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: *Types of works performed by returnees at destination countries*



Understanding of "Return" and "Reintegration"

The term “return” is the process of rescuing and retuning back workers working in foreign countries to their homeland. Return is referred to the returning of migrant workers after working in foreign land. Some return after having a good tenure with good earning while some return after facing many difficulties. Return can be explained as workers leaving for foreign employment

mostly according to the contract signed and following various processes according to Nepal government. They must return after completion of their contract and work but some return with a problem and some return with no problem. Any processes that include workers returning to their own country are known as returnee. There are problems related to this topic regarding the situation of the family before and after leaving for foreign employment. In case of “return”, Nepal government should ensure migrant worker’s willingness to return to their home country by arranging their immediate return. For instance, at present, many migrant workers are facing many difficulties and want to return to their home country due to lockdown. So, arranging immediate return of those migrant workers should be the primary responsibility of the government.

Reintegration is the process of helping returnee migrants through different packages and programs to initiate their own business or entrepreneurship. So, re-integration refers to a process of giving all the rights and provisions to those migrant workers that help them settle in their home nation. For re-integrating migrant workers, there should be proper arrangements where they can practice as well as utilize their skills, knowledge and experiences that they have learned during their time abroad. The immediate reintegration is necessary for those who return with trouble, vulnerable and from problematic situation. Thus, for reintegrating returnees, especially three level of reintegration is essential asocial reintegration, economic and psychosocial reintegration.

Attention Paid to Return and Re-Integration

The government of Nepal has framed various migration governing laws and policies. The Foreign Employment Act, 2007, Foreign Employment Regulation 2008, Foreign Employment Policy 2012 and Constitution of Nepal 2015 are the laws and policies governing foreign labour migration. There are very few policy measures regarding return and re-integration. Those few existing policy measures are also not properly implemented. Therefore, policies should be made focusing on migrant workers’ rights, access to resources, social protection, gender equality etc. There are separate laws and policies regarding return and re-integration. However, Foreign Employment Act and Foreign Employment Policy have the provision of return and reintegration. In current policy measures, very little attention has been paid to return and reintegration which is not conditional at all. This is a matter which needs to be under policy makers’ attention.

From policy perspective, it seems the government has played a sensitive role in terms of return and reintegration of women migrant workers during crisis period like in COVID-19 situation; however, the effort is not sufficient. The existing policies lack the ideas of social and economic reintegration. Although the Foreign Employment Board has included this matter in yearly policy programs since past few years with strategical direction, the implementation part is very weak. The Ministry has also realized the need social and economic reintegration; however, the progress is not seen yet. In current policy, if there’s a group of people who really want to come back and reintegrate in society, they need to be facilitated. This issue becomes the priority of everyone, but its implementation part has been awaiting since long past.

It is obvious that reintegration of returnee migrants takes time. There are many things that work under re-integration regarding the situation on mental and physical health, social and economic aspect. Women face different types of abuses at destination and some return with pregnancy. There are challenges on returning to their family and acceptance. These are the overall topics to look upon for re-integration. Nepal government should work efficiently to establish different policies as well as to amend existing policies to prioritize the social and economic re-integration with proper implementation plan. These policies should be able to address the issues related with women returnee migrant workers. Although, reintegration process is an on-going process which takes time, the government should work efficiently to establish different policies as

well as to amend the existing policies. The new policies should focus on migrant workers' rights, access to resources, social protection, gender equality etc. These policies should not put any condition from the human rights perspective.

Dominant Discourse Failing to Address Women Migrant Workers

Majority of people belong to Aadibasi Janajati (indigenous nationalities) in this study and people from Tamang community going to foreign employment are more in number and People from Dalit community going to foreign employment are less. In the case of trafficking, that is, if any girl, boy or mass population, and third gender fall vulnerability of trafficking, how existing laws and policies support for the immediate rescue, return, resettlement and rehabilitation is the matter raised as a dominant discourse. There are legal provisions but in behavior, there are various missing factors, loopholes due to which we can see individual interest and attitudes playing over. For and foremost, different categories of people who come back with different economic status need to be addressed with specific policies. In the name of protecting workers travelling abroad for employment, the Nepal government issued an order banning Nepali citizens from travelling to the Gulf for jobs as domestic workers. But this stopped many girls who used formal channels to go abroad and do labour for self and family hand to mouth. The government has a saying as to protect women migrant workers from trafficking and violence; various illegal touts are being used to take these girls which have the chances of vulnerability. Therefore, Nepal government should also work effectively ensuring foreign labour the motivational factor unless enough alternatives inside the country are developed by providing them with different skills and arranging different provisions. It's the accountability of the government by taking responsibilities and delivering positive outcomes on the matters related to foreign labour.

Companies' Preference and Women Migrant Workers' Experiences

There isn't much bias toward workers in terms of gender, class, caste, education in foreign employment as the employers are foreign companies. The company has separate criteria where employees are chosen accordingly in terms of gender. Talking about education it's easy to employ workers that are educated or at least able to speak English language. Personnel from the selected companies said, "we hire employees who are educated in the particular field." The employer doesn't really look upon class and castes. They would rather search for workers according to the needs of the company.

The number of people going to certain countries determines the perception as well. Women going to Israel are not more than 400-500 a year but nobody has gone there since last year because of the pandemic. More number of migrants go to the countries like Iraq, Lebanon so the bigger population of migrants can determine support level. Majority of women migrants going to foreign employment has negative stories. Because of their large population the order of them coming to the embassy is more and they present the records of cases. But the records of success and positive side of stories are not publicized by embassies. Good practices and cases are not shown. In conversation with women migrant returnees who have worked in gulf countries for 10/20 years, it is found they have been able to provide quality of life, quality education and many of them have sent their son and daughter to countries like Australia. This was possible only because they went for foreign employment though they worked as domestic workers.

The experiences of returnee women migrant workers are found mixed though. Some returnees have successful migration stories but some have bitter experiences at both destinations and native land. Most of the women shared their views that society overlooked them due to types of country of destination and their employment status as domestic work. Some returnees shared

their bitter experiences of exploitative situations in their country of destination whereas some expressed that they faced the problem of divorce and family disintegration.

Everyone's experiences and stories are different. Some of their family accepted them and they're having a good life while after returning from foreign country they've been through dispute. If she starts working hard to prove that she can earn a living and be dependent as a dispute resolution she is more likely to be progressive. While many of them have committed suicide because of his capability of tolerating the unsupportive family despite her hard works in foreign countries. Women Migrant returnees have been getting support, counselling from local level stakeholders. Family should feel the struggle she has done in foreign country.

Experiences of Women Returnees on Land Ownership

Land and property ownership has significant meaning for returnee women to maintain balance life after return to Nepal. The level of confidence is higher with those who have landownership than those who do not have. Most of the women migrants belong to Janajati group who do not have land and resources ownership that is why they feel insecure after return to native land. So, the government should have provision of loan with low interest rate or soft loan and grant for initiating self-employment or entrepreneurship. The land ownership is intricately related with economic empowerment which enhances returnee women for decision making on their behalf. So, reintegration packages need to be provided to those returnee women migrants who do not have land and property ownership.

Experiences Considering Gender, Class, Caste and Education

The experiences of returnee women migrant workers vary along with gender, class, caste, and education. Those who are upper caste, educated and male have better experience of migration in comparison to female who are illiterate, are from low-income family and from Dalit caste. However, in the case of women if they come up with money, they are accepted somehow. Furthermore, returnee men are well supported and taken as an example in their society when they return to their country while returnee women are doubted in every decision they take. They are not well respected and accepted in their society when they return from foreign land no matter what work they do.

Most of the women went foreign land due to failure and dissatisfaction of previous works. Familial dispute, domestic violence, psychological pressure or torture for being infertile etc. are the leading reasons to decide to leave the nation for either kind of work in a foreign land. Very few of them have gone along with the consensus and agreement of family members. They go, work and return due to several reasons. In some cases, the husband has accepted her due to her changed appearance or her economic status. But in other cases, she realizes everything has collapsed when she returns. A lot of them have realized that they have gained some money, experience and skills and want to do something in their own country rather than going back to foreign land.

Mostly educated people go to better countries in terms of earning and security so there is no problem and no need of reintegration packages for them. But the women with low level of education and who are economically, socially deprived require reintegration packages and programs. The social cohesiveness also determines the social and economic reintegration of the returnee women migrant workers. Due to patriarchal social structure, returnee women in comparison to man face more challenges like stigma, viewed doubtfully and are more vulnerable. Men have easily acceptable in comparison to women after return in native land. Therefore, returnee women migrant workers should be given priority for their reintegration as they are more exploited and excluded in terms of these issues. Although, there is a provision of special protection to

migrant workers according to the constitution; this kind of provision has not been successfully implemented on a practical basis and needs concrete implementation program.

Experiences of Women Returning from "Better Status" Job Opportunities to Worse

There is a difference in way people treat people returning from better status jobs and country with good income and those who did not. People who return in a good circumstance with a good income are accepted as well as respected in society while those who did not are looked down upon by people in the society. If women came from better status of job and returned from Europe, America and with huge amount of money they are considered positive whether they did good or bad. Better jobs and country really matter from society in terms of social reintegration. The returnee women from Japan, America, European countries would be perceived with high status, respectfully treated while those returned from Qatar, Dubai, Malaysia and similar countries are perceived as poor and backward. So, the destination countries and states of job are the substantively determining factors for developing perception of people to returnee migrant workers.

Structural Weakness Exposed by Covid-19

Lockdown because of pandemic situations exacerbate risks of violence, exploitation, abuse or harassment against women, as has been seen during the COVID crisis. Women's voices are still not well represented. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the fear is that gender employment gaps like these leave women more vulnerable than men to job loss but access to justice and service mechanism is limited that is major challenges to get access in available welfare service to returnees. Most of returnee women from GCCs are domestic workers where they were vulnerable and compelled to work for longer duration of time. Furthermore, they suffered from insecurity and violence and they have very limited access to the right information and access on the available opportunities.

Migrant women are particularly vulnerable in these situations, due to language and information barriers. Due to the pandemic and the subsequent movement restrictions, jobs losses, cramped living situations and economic pressures that households are under, there has been a substantial increase in levels of domestic violence; however, many support services remain temporarily closed. Similarly, migrant workers are often excluded from accessing the COVID-19 measures implemented by the countries in which they work, including financial support packages, wage subsidies, income support and social protection. Migrant women, especially those in precarious and informal employment, as well as those with irregular migration status, were already facing barriers to accessing health care and maternity protections before the pandemic.

Most of the returnee migrants are found to have mental health problems. They also face different social problems along with psychological problems. All these affairs arise due to lack of proper policies and programs. Likewise, ignorance of migrant workers' family in these issues is also a major weakness when it comes to women returnees' welfare. For migrant workers, including domestic workers who have lost their jobs, they are getting problems for assistance and social protection and repatriation due to weak government mechanism.

Due to the structural weakness migrant women are facing lack of comprehensive and timely support that be provided to the vulnerable migrant population. Effective coordination among relevant parties in both countries, including the governments concerned has missed to be facilitated women migrant workers. Most of the returnees experienced a significant number of negative emotions such as being worried, afraid, restless, and anxious. Economic problems, family concerns, fear of being exposed to the virus, information overload, lack of social support, and language barriers were major sources of stress.

Reflections of existing support and expectations of support system were missing during this pandemic. Due to structural barriers women returnees are unaware in sources of support, adequate information and rapid mechanism for rescues, compensation and re-integration. Stigma and discrimination in the host country coupled with a lack of social support could be a major stressful factor for migrant residents in any host country during any major crisis. There are very few women representative who are involved in policy making. Thus, this is a structural weakness exposed before COVID- 19 as well as while in COVID times. As there are no women representatives, there is no one to raise issues related to women returnee. Likewise, very little to no topics concerning women returnees' welfare is discussed in policy discussion panel. This issue is prevalent in every part of Nepal which needs to be resolved. Women should be given chance to stand along with men in that policy making role representing other women.

Reintegration Support for Returnees

The reintegration support is not same for documented returnee migrants, trafficked persons and undocumented returnees. The government of Nepal has the provision of reintegration programs for documented returnees and survivors of trafficking but there is no provision of reintegration packages to undocumented returnees due to their illegal status and lack of required documents to meet the requirement for the packages. Reintegration policy and programs are the key to reintegration process. However, government of Nepal does not have policy provision of reintegration to undocumented returnees. The inequality is seen in between documented and undocumented returnee migrants.

Mostly, the women domestic migrant workers who worked as housemaid having low level of education especially returned with undocumented status and most of the cases of trafficking is related with the undocumented women migrant workers. There is no policy provision of government to rescue and repatriate to such migrants and there are barriers to get facilities and services offered by government of Nepal due to their illegal status at destination and at their homeland. It is obvious that those who have returned with legal status have better access on the government support rather than undocumented returnees.

In some cases, the perception of society towards high and low earning returnees is different and sometimes the country of destination also has different values in terms of reintegration. Returners who have high earnings and from developed have better access of reintegration services of government and they also get positive responses, but the scenario is different for returning from gulf countries having low level of earning. So, it is easy for women returning from Israel and other developed countries to be reintegrated as she is easily accepted by society. Whereas those coming back from gulf countries with low level of income is difficult to be reintegrated in the society due to perception. So, the reintegration plan, policies and program need to orient towards the returnee migrants regardless of their legal status.

Conclusion

Nepal is one of the major labour sending countries in the south Asia in terms of contribution to national GDP. There are different legal and policy provisions in terms of foreign labour migration but there is a not specific legal and policy provision for return and re-integration especially of returnee women migrant workers. Majority of returnee women from Gulf countries were involved in domestic workers where they went by denying the prohibitory legal provision result in illegal/undocumented status. The reintegration of returnee women migrant workers from richer country with better income is not difficult and problematic however the returnees from Gulf with low income is observed and found problematic. The household relation with family has been destroyed and marital relations have turned into divorce leading to traumatic situations.

During COVID-19, the burden of work of domestic migrant workers has drastically increased and abuses to them inclusion physical and sexual violence has reached paramount. In some cases, the violence against returnee women has increased after return to Nepal. In such situation, both types of women, after return in Nepal, need especial psychosocial counseling with appropriate care. Some returnee women returned with some knowledge, skills and experiences that have the aspiration to do something in the native land need to make especial policy and plan for their effective and sustainable re-integration here in Nepal. The existing legal and policy provisions are itself proved that they are not working so need to amend. The lack of especial policy provision and program to testing the skills of returnee women also compel them to adopt the third or illegal way to involve in remigration process. The negative perception of society and relatives to returnee women also increases the level of stigma which stands as the barrier to psychological, social and economic reintegration in the host communities.

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